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A CRITICAL INCIDENT STUDY OF THE PROFESSIONAL ADULT EDUCATOR (EXTENSION AGRICULTURAL AGENT). PAPER PRESENTED AT THE NATIONAL SEMINAR ON ADULT EDUCATION RESEARCH (CHICAGO, FEBRUARY 11-13, 1968).

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THE CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUE WAS USED TO DETERMINE JOB REQUIREMENTS OF IDAHO AGRICULTURAL AGENTS. A PERSONAL INTERVIEW OF 70 IDAHO AGENTS RESULTED IN THE COLLECTION OF 436 USABLE EFFECTIVE AND INEFFECTIVE INCIDENTS. JOB REQUIREMENTS WERE DEVELOPED BY CATEGORIZING THE 975 CRITICAL BEHAVIORS IDENTIFIED IN THE CRITICAL INCIDENTS, AND WERE CLASSIFIED IN FIVE MAJOR AREAS--GROUP DEVELOPMENT, PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT, COUNSELING CLIENTS, INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS, AND MAINTAINING THE ORGANIZATION. THE FINDINGS REVEALED THAT SOCIAL SKILLS WERE USED MORE THAN TECHNICAL SKILLS IN CRITICAL AREAS OF THE JOB. AGENTS FELT LESS EFFECTIVE IN SOCIAL SITUATIONS AND IN THE CRITICAL INCIDENTS WHEN THEY DID NOT INITIATE ACTION. THEY DEPENDED ON INDIVIDUAL CONTACTS FOR GETTING RESULTS AND WORKED THROUGH AVAILABLE SOCIAL SYSTEMS. SPECIALIZED AGENTS FELT THEY WERE MORE EFFECTIVE, FOUND THEIR JOB MORE SATISFYING, AND WORKED MORE CLOSELY WITH PUBLIC AGENCIES THAN GENERALIZED AGENTS. AGENTS WITH HIGH GRADE POINT AVERAGES SAW MORE OF THEIR ACTIONS AS CRITICAL, DEVOTED MORE TIME TO PROGRAM PLANNING, AND WERE MORE EFFECTIVE IN COUNSELING CLIENTS. HIGH SUPERVISORY RATINGS WERE GIVEN TO AGENTS WHO WORKED PRIMARILY WITH ADULT CLIENTELE IN TRADITIONAL AGRICULTURAL AREAS. THIS DOCUMENT WAS A PAPER PRESENTED AT THE NATIONAL SEMINAR ON ADULT EDUCATION, CHICAGO, FEBRUARY 11-13, 1968. (PT)

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A CRITICAL INCIDENT STUDY OF THE PROFESSIONAL ADULT EDUCATOR (EXTENSION AGRICULTURAL AGENT)

By

Fred E. Kohl and G. L. Carter, Jr.*

The major purposes of this study were to 1) determine the critical requirements for the job of Idaho Extension agricultural agent based on an analysis of critical incidents and 2) to study several situational factors related to critical incidents. The specific objectives were to:

1. Identify the critical behaviors of Idaho Extension agricultural agents as revealed in critical incidents;
2. Develop a classification system and determine the critical requirements for the job of Idaho Extension agricultural agent by categorizing critical behaviors;
3. Identify specified situational factors revealed in critical incidents;
4. Determine if effective and ineffective incidents vary according to:
    a. Types of critical behaviors reported;
    b. Situational factors reported;
5. Determine if a relationship exists between specified characteristics of Idaho Extension agricultural agents and
    a. Types of critical behaviors reported;
    b. Situational factors reported.

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Conceptualization of the Study

The accompanying model of agent effectiveness, (see Figure 1) adopted from Biddle,[1] simultaneously does two things: 1) It shows how this study fits into the general field of research on agent effectiveness. 2) It supports and puts into perspective the use of the critical incident technique in determining the behavioral requirements for and situational factors related to perceived effective performance of Idaho Extension agricultural agents. Variables are represented visually in terms of a system of postulated cause-and-effect relationships. Five of the variables are postulated to form a cause-and-effect main sequence. Formative experiences, agent properties, agent behaviors, immediate effects, and long-term consequences form a sequence such that each variable class in the sequence causes effects in the next variable class listed.

The other two variables are postulated to be contexts for portions of the main sequence. The specific context encompasses (and interacts with) agent properties, agent behaviors, and immediate effects. The general context encompasses (and interacts with) formative experiences, agent properties, agent behaviors, immediate effects and long-term consequences.

The effectiveness model suggests that criteria of effective agent performance become more valid as one moves from the left to the right with the "main sequence" variables. Few studies in the educational field have dealt with long-term consequences of an educator's actions, and relatively few have even attempted to measure immediate effects. Because of methodological difficulties most studies have dealt with either formative experiences or various properties or characteristics of the educator. This study focuses on specific agent behaviors which resulted in either effective

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[1]Bruce J. Biddle in Bruce J. Biddle and William J. Ellena (eds.), Contemporary Research on Teacher Effectiveness (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), pp. 7 ff.

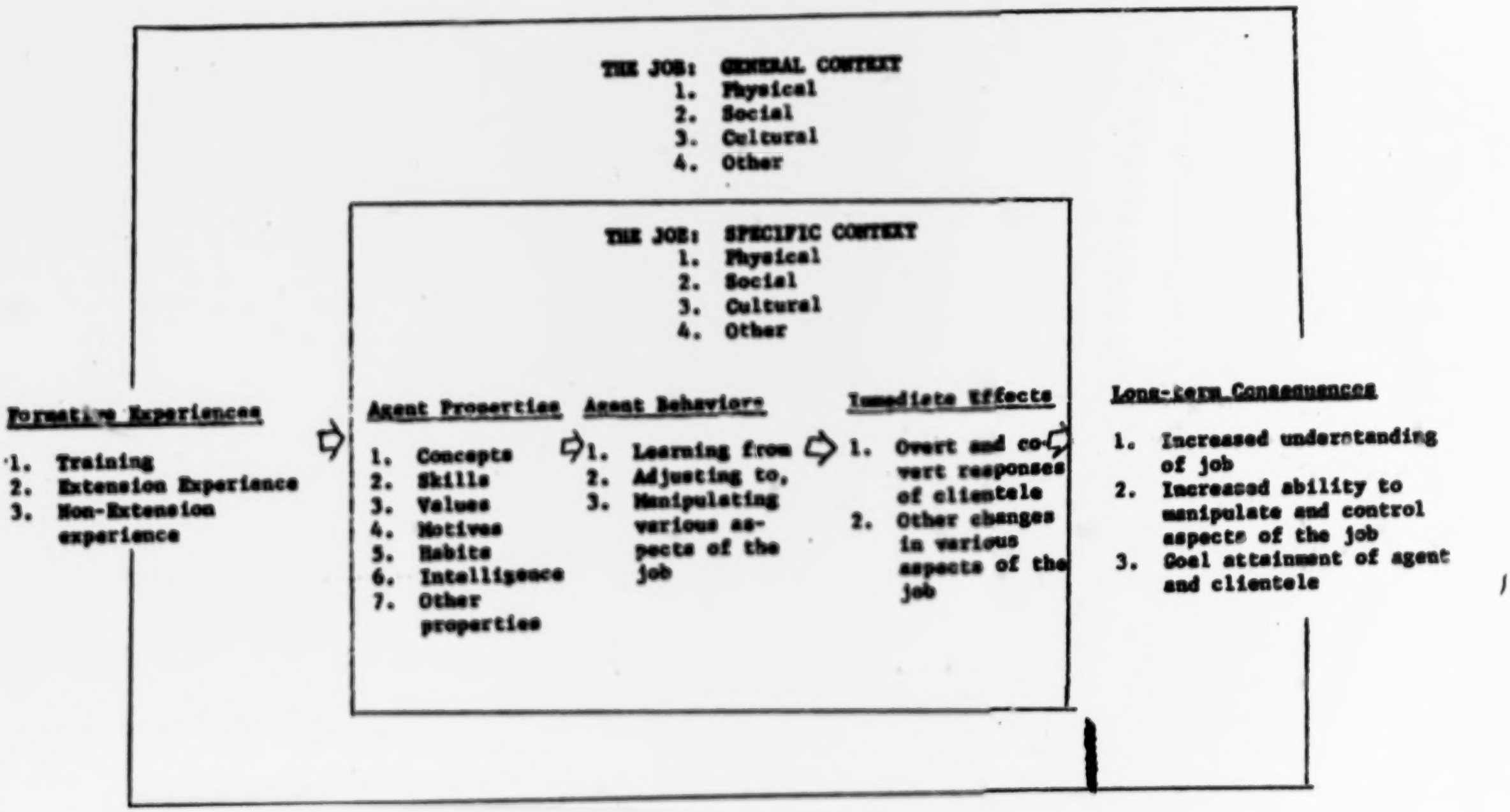

Figure 1. -- A seven-variable-class model of agent effectiveness. Note: Variables listed in each class are examples.

or ineffective outcomes (as seen by agents) in terms of immediate effects and/or long-term consequences. Thus, while results may not be as valid as they would be had they been gathered directly as "effects" or "consequences," they should have an advantage over results gathered as formative experiences or agent properties.

Methodology and Procedure

This study utilized the critical incident technique. In general, the technique may be described as a flexible set of procedures for collecting and analyzing observed behaviors in such a way as to reveal important information concerning the performance of a job or activity. In this study the technique was the means by which critical incidents were collected, classified, and analyzed so that the researcher could study factors related to performance judged to be effective or ineffective by Idaho Extension agricultural agents. A critical incident was defined as an episode which occurs in a specific situation in which the consequences are sufficiently definite to be judged by the agent as being outstandingly effective or ineffective.

A pool of 436 usable effective and ineffective incidents were collected by personal interview from a total population of 70 Idaho agents. Incidents were recorded on tape as the agents related them. They were later transcribed and the essential elements of each incident were abstracted and placed on a 5 by 8 card for easier manipulation and analysis. To be considered usable, a critical incident had to include the circumstances leading up to the incident, the actions taken by the agent, and the results of the action.

Critical job requirements for Idaho agents were developed by inductively categorizing the 975 critical behaviors identified in the critical

incidents, using a training frame of reference. Critical behaviors were defined as those specific acts reported by an agent considered to contribute directly to effective or ineffective consequences in a specific incident. Critical job requirements were defined as generalized behaviors arrived at inductively by grouping similar critical behaviors. They were written in such a way as to describe in positive, objective terms the behaviors of agents considered to contribute directly to effective or ineffective consequences in a substantial number of incidents.

Behaviors (and job requirements) were classified into five major areas and 10 subareas:

I. Group development
   - A. Organizing groups
   - B. Maintaining groups
   - C. Developing leaders

II. Program development
   - A. Planning programs
   - B. Conducting programs

III. Counseling individual clients with technical problems

IV. Interpersonal relations
   - A. Improving relations between agent and others
   - B. Mediating disagreements between others

V. Maintaining the organization
   - A. Managing the office
   - B. Managing the staff
   - C. Maintaining good public relations

Critical incident situational factors studied were: 1) most important subject content (social, technological, or combination social and

technological); 2) initiator of action (agent, others, or failure of agent to take action); 3) most important contact between agent and others (individual, group, or mass audience); and social systems with which agents were involved.

Relationships between the items studied were determined by comparing frequencies and percentages.

Development of the Critical Incident Technique

The critical incident techniques was first used in studies in the Aviation Psychology Program of the U. S. Army Air Forces in World War II. These studies were undertaken to develop procedures for selecting and classifying air crews. Essentially, the procedure was to obtain first-hand reports, or reports from objective records, of satisfactory and unsatisfactory execution of tasks assigned. Cooperating individuals described situations in which success or failure was determined by specific reported causes. The success of selection and training procedures which were developed provides some of the strongest evidence of the usefulness of technique.

John C. Flanagan (now of the American Institute for Research and the University of Pittsburgh) had an important part in initiating the critical incident studies of the Aviation Psychology Program, and has continued to be involved in this type of research. He and numerous other individuals and groups have used this technique to determine the critical requirements and to study other aspects of a wide variety of occupations and professions. It has been used with nurses, teachers, school administrators, directors and ministers of Christian education, psychiatric aides, Air Force maintenance technicians and air crew members, private secretaries,

hourly wage employees, and many others. (A bibliography prepared by Flanagan in 1963 listed more than 200 references pertaining to the critical incident technique.)

The technique has been described as follows:

> . . . the critical incident technique, rather than collecting opinions, hunches, and estimates, obtains a record of specific behaviors from those in the best position to make the necessary observations and evaluations. The collection and tabulation of these observations make it possible to formulate the critical requirements of an activity. A list of critical behaviors provides a sound basis for making inferences as to requirements in terms of aptitudes, training, and other characteristics.[1]

A number of steps are generally followed in conducting studies using the critical incident technique. The key steps appear to be selecting the observer group, collecting the incidents, determining the frame of reference to describe results, identifying and classifying critical behaviors, and determing critical job requirements. Determining the relationship between critical incidents and control variables is also frequently a feature of critical incident studies.

Interpretation of Findings

Several findings which seem particularly significant will be developed in this paper. They also suggest areas for possible fruitful research.

Social versus technical competency

Findings of this study suggest that agents employ a greater proportion of social than technical skills in critical areas of the job. Agents saw working with people as more critical than technology. Only 16 percent of all critical behaviors were classified in the area most directly concerned with technology--counseling clients with technical problems. Even in this area, however, the need for social competencies was apparent.

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[1] John C. Flanagan, "The Critical Incident Technique," Psychological Bulletin, LI (1954), p. 355.

While agents appeared to employ a greater proportion of social than technological skills, they saw themselves performing less effectively in social than in technological situations. They saw their actions as being more effective in aspects of the job which were of a combination social and technological nature. These findings may be related to the idea that learning is most effective when students are able to apply or relate abstract knowledge to concrete situations. Kohl[1] found that agents received their highest grades in courses classified as combination abstract/applied. If a similar situation exists in performing Extension work, agents may be more effective in applying a combination of social and technical skills than either of the two separately.

Initiator of action

Agents initiated action in critical incidents only slightly more than half of the time, but saw themselves more often as effective when they did. It appears that agents perform more effectively when they are in control of a situation and plan and execute definite actions than when others initiate action to which they must respond.

Failing to take action when the situation demanded it (occurring in 11% of all incidents) illustrates another aspect of control. Several reasons for agents' not taking action were apparent: insufficient planning; not assessing a situation completely and accurately; following habitual patterns of activity; not knowing at the time what action to take; fearing consequences of action; and holding a negative attitude toward the activity in question. In any case, failing to take action allowed a situation to continue without the control which might have been

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[1]Fred E. Kohl, "Relationship of Formal Training and Job Content to Effectiveness of Idaho County Extension Agricultural Agents: (unpublished M.S. thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1966).

exerted by the agent. He lost control by default, as it were, allowing undesirable consequences to occur.

Most important contact between agent and others

Agents saw themselves depending most heavily upon individual contacts in getting results, less upon group contacts, and very little upon mass audience contacts. This phenomenon may reflect a preference by agents for personal contacts over group or mass audience contacts. Another interpretation is that in spite of the increasing size of Extension audiences and the need for use of mass media techniques, individual contacts are still the most important in accomplishing objectives--in getting the job done.

Still another explanation concerns the ease with which different types of contacts may be evaluated. In mass contacts, feedback is slower and more difficult to obtain. Agents thus have little to base an evaluation upon and realize the occurrence of fewer critical incidents. It is perhaps easiest to evaluate the results of person-to-person encounters, because more indications are available and feedback is often instantaneous. Group contacts would fall between these two extremes.

Social systems with which agents were involved

Findings and conclusions of this study indicate that critical areas of the agent's job are primarily social areas and for the most part concern social systems which make up the larger society. Agents related themselves to these social systems rather than to individuals as individuals, and saw their actions as more effective when working with social systems. That they were aware of the social systems with which they worked is evidenced by the fact that they called them by name, although

they not have been thinking of them in terms of "social systems." It thus appears that agents are aware of the implications of their actions beyond the specific individuals and groups with whom they come in contact.

It is apparent that agents organize, maintain and utilize many groups in doing the Extension job. Working with 4-H member groups appears to be a sensitive area--one perhaps requiring skills of a higher order than are needed in working with other social systems. Agents saw their actions with 4-H member groups as relatively ineffective, in large part because of problems arising with parents and leaders in relation to 4-H contests and awards.

Efforts in working with program planning and advisory committees were generally seen as effective by agents, even though some efforts were undertaken with reluctance and at the insistence of administrators.

Specialized and generalized agents

Specialized agents are those agents who reported devoting more than half of their job time to a particular subject area. Two-thirds of them have Masters degrees. This group seemed to be oriented toward technical subject matter to a greater extent than did generalized agents. By being able to say "no" to requests for help in many miscellaneous activities they may have been able to concentrate on their major interests, particularly in advising and counseling individuals on agricultural problems. They worked more closely with other public agencies than did generalized agents, consulting and cooperating with them on various projects of mutual concern.

Specialized agents see their overall performance as somewhat more effective than do generalized agents. They may thus find the job somewhat more satisfying. They seem to feel particularly more effective in

planning programs and in interpersonal relations. In planning programs, specialized agents can confine their efforts largely to their field of specialty--thus to the field in which they feel most competent. The generalized agent is responsible for some areas in which he feels incompletely prepared and thus his planning effort may seem less effective to him.

The specialized agent has a more concrete and tangible subject area in which to work than does the generalized agent. He may also find that the structure of the subject matter itself aids him in performing effectively. The generalized agent, on the other hand, works in a more ambiguous situation and thus finds himself constantly attempting to discover structure. The limited area in which the specialized agent works allows him to anticipate more accurately the problems which are likely to confront him. The generalized agent has a broader and less predictable range of possibilities to contemplate.

Greater perceived effectiveness in interpersonal relations by the specialized agent may be the result of his finding fewer occasions in which he is unsure of himself. He may be able to structure or control situations to a higher degree than the generalized agent. He may encounter fewer unanticipated situations to which he must respond. Further, he is relatively free of the organizational aspects of 4-H--one area of possible frustration and conflict.

<u>High versus low GPA's</u>

Agents with high GPA's see more of their actions as critical than do agents with low GPA's. An explanation for this phenomenon may be found in some of the reasons persons receive high GPA's: high motivation, good study habits and self discipline, and superior mental attributes. Translated to the job, these factors suggest a type of agent

who has dedication to do good work, a conceptual organization or method of attacking problem situations which has proven successful for him in the past, and intelligence to do the job. The high GPA agent may be more sensitive to problem areas in his job and to the consequences of his own actions in relation to these problem areas. His powers of discrimination may be greater than those of the low GPA agent.

The high GPA agent sees himself as devoting more time to planning programs but as performing less effectively in this area. He also sees himself as devoting more attention to social situations. Planning, it has previously been suggested, seems to involve a higher order of conceptual skill than does carrying out an activity. The high GPA agent may be placing a higher priority on planning but, at the same time, is more critical of his performance in this area. Social situations also involve more skills related to dealing with abstractions or to conceptualization than do technological situations.

In seeing himself as more effective in counseling clients and in interpersonal relations, the high GPA agent seems to be contradicting the popular image of the good student as one who has difficulty in getting along with others.

The researcher can offer little explanation of why agents with high GPA's see themselves as relatively less effective in maintaining groups, developing leaders, and maintaining the organization. They perhaps recognize their inadequacies in these areas more perceptively than do low GPA agents.

High and low supervisor ratings

Findings and conclusions relating to supervisor ratings will first be interpreted in relation to findings from a previous study based on

essentially the same population of agents. The same supervisor ratings were used in both studies, although data from only 57 agents were available for analysis in the present situation. A thumbnail sketch of a hypothetical "effective" Idaho agent in the first study stated that such an agent "concentrates on work with adults, spending relatively more time in plant and animal science and less in organization, planning, and development and in home economics."[1] This description is consistent with several of the conclusions made in the present study, although the degree of concentration in various areas of the job in the first study came from agents' annual statistical reports rather than from critical incidents.

Data from the present study also indicate that the agent who rates higher with his supervisor is the one concentrating on work with adults rather than with 4-H. The worker with adults is the one who spends more time in the technical agriculture areas of plant and animal science. "Organization, planning, and development" was a composite category which included several miscellaneous activities and overlaps several categories used in the present study. However, it included leadership development, a category associated in the present study with organizing groups and 4-H Club work--and a lower rating. Job time reported in home economics in the previous study was also related to 4-H Club work, as this category comprised the work of agents spent in organizing and servicing home economics clubs and assisting their leaders.

One reason why the agent working primarily with 4-H rated lower may be that he does not have the contact with the supervisor that the

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[1]Kohl, op. cit., p. 69.

adult worker (generally the senior agent) has. The supervisor may form his impression of the youth agent largely by the impression held by the senior agent. If the senior agent is not completely informed of the activities of the youth agent, and especially if he is not convinced of the importance of these activities, he may--perhaps inadvertantly--bias the evaluation which the supervisor makes of the youth agent.

Findings of the present study enable one to elaborate additional differences between high and low rated agents. The higher rated agent devotes more effort to developing programs (predominately in technical agriculture) and he works more closely with other agents, specialists, and other representatives of the University. However, he works less closely with Extension-sponsored groups in general and with adult groups concerned with 4-H and with 4-H member groups in particular. He relies more on individual, less on group contacts, than does the lower rated agent.

Agents with low supervisor ratings reported fewer total behaviors as well as fewer effective-related behaviors in maintaining the organization. These findings appear to have significance when findings of another study are taken into consideration. Utz[1] found that agents rated low by their supervisors tended to be in conflict with the organization and to look to the local society for their major source of satisfaction. Agents rated high, on the other hand, tended to be organizationally (institutionally) oriented and to utilize the forces of the organization to obtain personal goals. Findings of the two studies thus support the idea that supervisors tend to rate higher the agents who are organizationally oriented.

Evidence from both studies conducted by Kohl indicated that working primarily with an adult clientele in rather traditional agricultural areas

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[1]Alan P. Utz, Jr., "An Analysis of Selected Factors Relative to Programming Efforts of Kentucky County Extension Agents" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1965), pp. 246-247.

was associated with a high supervisory rating. Additional evidence suggests the following factors may be associated with a high rating: 1) working well with fellow staff members and other representatives of the University--the impression of the agent gained by these representatives may be of importance to the supervisor; 2) being able to get along with the clientele--the agent certainly should avoid arousing the enmity of too many or too powerful clients; 3) doing one's part to operate a creditable county Extension office and maintain a good image of the Extension organization.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study emphasize the need for objectively characterizing effective Extension agent performance. Longitudinal studies are most needed--studies of sufficient range to permit evaluation of behavior in terms of long-term consequences. Such research is largely ruled out, however, by monetary and time considerations. The most practical and feasible alternative is to focus on effects of behaviors in the short run. This approach deserves major attention. Several specific research suggestions which follow further emphasize the need for objective performance measures.

1. The critical incident situational factors identified and analyzed in this study seem worthy of further exploration. They are: 1) most important subject content; 2) initiator of action; 3) most important contact; and 4) social systems with which agents were involved. More refined techniques are needed to adequately examine these factors.
    a. Findings of this study suggest that agents may perform more effectively in situations requiring a combination of social and technical skills. In a previous study it was found that agents got higher grades in combination abstract/applied

courses. Do agents perform (learn and teach) more effectively at a certain optimum mix of abstraction and concreteness?

b. Findings suggest that agents may perform more effectively when they initiate action than when others do. What is the relation between performance and ability to anticipate or control situations?

c. It appeared that agents depended most heavily on individual contacts in doing their work and that mass audience contacts were of little importance to them. Studies employing a different research technique might be directed to ascertaining whether this is actually the case.

d. The number and types of social systems with which agents involve themselves have implications for the conduct of Extension work. Other studies might verify the extent to which agents rely on various social systems and the effect which such reliance has upon program content and effectiveness.

2. Some agents had difficulty in relating specific incidents, and some had particular difficulty in describing their own actions. These findings suggest that agents vary in their ability to conceptualize the job in its significant aspects, as well as their relationship to it. Research is needed to study these possibilities and to determine their relationship to measures of performance.

3. Clues were given which indicate that specialized agents may perform more effectively than generalized agents and that youth agents may perform less effectively than workers with adults. The subject areas with which specialized agents deal appear to more technical, while the subject areas of youth agents seem to be more social. Is the

effectiveness of an agent influenced by the tangibility or concreteness of the subject area with which he deals? Do agents differ in their ability to relate to intangible or abstract situations?

4. Many critical incidents indicate that how agents cope with new or changing situations has considerable bearing on their success. Flexibility or adaptability of agents thus appears to be an area of research worthy of attention.

5. Findings related to grade point averages raise research questions. Examination might be made of the relationship of grade point average to the manner in which agents relate to various aspects of their work. Existing tests of mental abilities might also be used.

TABLE 1 -- Distribution of critical behaviors reported by Idaho agents according to degree of job specialization (specialized/generalized), by behavior area and subareas

Behavior area and subareas	Specialized		Generalized		Difference[a]	
	No.	%	No.	%	Notable	Substantial
I. Group development						
A. Organizing groups	16	6	59	8		
B. Maintaining groups	12	5	47	6		
C. Developing leaders	7	2	68	10	X	
Area total	(35)	(13)	(174)	(24)		XX
II. Program development						
A. Planning programs	58	22	173	25		
B. Conducting programs	59	23	151	21		
Area total	(117)	(45)	(324)	(46)		
III. Counseling individual clients with technical problems	62	24	98	14		XX
IV. Interpersonal relations	24	9	58	8		
V. Maintaining the organization						
A. Managing the office and staff	17	6	31	4		
B. Maintaining good public relations	7	3	28	4		
Area total	(24)	(9)	(59)	(8)		
Total	262	100	713	100		

[a]A notable difference is 5 to 9 percentage points; substantial, 10 or more.

TABLE 2 -- Percentage of effective-related (E-R) and ineffective-related (I-R) critical behaviors reported by Idaho agents according to degree of job specialization (specialized/generalized), by behavior area and subarea

Behavior area and subarea	Specialized		Generalized		Difference[a]	
	E-R	I-R	E-R	I-R	Notable	Substantial
I. Group development						
A. Organizing groups	-	-	-	-		
B. Maintaining groups	-	-	-	-		
C. Developing leaders	-	-	-	-		
Area total	91	9	83	17	X	
II. Program development						
A. Planning programs	83	17	69	31		XX
B. Conducting programs	81	19	81	19		
Area total	(82)	(18)	(74)	(26)	X	
III. Counseling individual clients with technical problems	82	18	79	21		
IV. Interpersonal relations	83	17	59	41		XX
V. Maintaining the organization	75	25	61	39		XX

[a]A notable difference is 5 to 9 percentage points; substantial, 10 or more.

TABLE 3 -- Distribution of effective and of ineffective critical incidents reported by Idaho agents according to most important subject content

Subject content	Effective		Ineffective		Difference[a]	
	No.	%	No.	%	Notable	Substantial
Social	118	43	101	62		XX
Technological	49	18	27	17		
Combination social and technological	107	39	34	21		XX
Total	274	100	162	100		

[a]A notable difference is 5 to 9 percentage points; substantial 10 or more.

TABLE 4 -- Distribution of effective and of ineffective incidents reported by Idaho agents according to most important contact between agent and others

Most important contact	Effective		Ineffective		Difference[a]	
	No.	%	No.	%	Notable	Substantial
Individual	140	51	94	58	X	
Group	113	41	37	23		XX
Mass audience	13	5	12	7		
Not identified	8	3	19	12	X	
Total	274	100	162	100		

[a]A notable difference is 5 to 9 percentage points; substantial, 10 or more.

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